



Seguin, M., Lewis, R., Razmadze, M., Amirejibi, T. and Roberts, B. (2017) Coping strategies of internally displaced women in Georgia: a qualitative study. *Social Science and Medicine*, 194, pp. 34-41.

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Deposited on: 9 November 2017

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Abstract

There is limited evidence on the coping strategies of conflict-affected civilians in low and middle income countries. The aim of this paper is to explore the coping strategies used by women internally displaced within the Republic of Georgia due to the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. We use a five-fold coping typology to examine coping strategies in the accounts of 42 Georgian women residing in internally-displaced persons settlements. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during fieldwork in Georgia from December 2012 to February 2013. Problem solving and support seeking behaviours emerged as the most-commonly-used strategies. The findings suggest interventions fostering sustainable livelihoods and robust social networks are needed to utilise the coping strategies commonly used by internally displaced women in Georgia.

Keywords: Internally displaced persons, women's health, Georgia, conflict, coping, mental health, migration

Introduction

Mental health is recognized as a key public health issue for populations affected by war (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). As much of the existing literature on mental health of conflict-affected populations focuses on a narrow definition of mental health using a trauma-focused orientation (Steel et al., 2009), there is a comparatively small evidence base on protective factors, including coping mechanisms, against poor mental health outcomes among conflict-affected persons. Most of this small evidence base is focused on refugees in high-income countries, even though most people forcibly displaced by conflict are internally displaced persons (IDPs) within their own countries or refugees in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (UNHCR, 2015). There is a particular paucity of research on how IDPs and refugees in LMICs cope in response to exposure to conflict, forced displacement, trauma and loss (Seguin & Roberts, 2015). This is despite coping being identified as a priority research area for mental health and psychosocial support among conflict-affected populations (Tol et al., 2011). The aim of this paper is to explore the coping strategies used by women internally displaced within the Republic of Georgia due to the Russo-Georgian war in 2008.

Despite evidence suggesting that men and women cope differently with war and displacement, there has been little focus specifically on either men or women to understand their approaches to coping. A review of the existing evidence on coping among IDPs and refugees in LMICs identified that women were more likely to engage in emotion-oriented and support-seeking coping than men, who were more likely to engage in problem solving and recreational activities (Seguin & Roberts, 2015). Conflict-affected women and men experience war and displacement differently with women more likely to face structural barriers resulting in economic, social, and physical insecurity. Conflict-affected females may face sexual assault (Liebling & Kiziri-Mayengo, 2002), and/or the loss of spouse (and associated increased responsibility of single-

handedly managing homes and looking after children) (Morina & Emmelkamp, 2012), while their male counterparts may face detention, abduction, and combat (Somasundaram, 1994). The higher use of alcohol among men than women among conflict-affected populations may create yet another stressor for women (Lo et al., 2017). Miller et al. (2006) found that Afghani cultural characteristics which emphasizes family honour (sometimes entailing damaging practices toward women including early marriage, violence in the home, and barriers in women accessing legal and human rights) block women's access to resources and may lead to elevated levels of poor mental health. In their study on war-affected Pakistanis and Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Husain et al. (2007) found that a greater proportion of women than men reported problems regarding housing, neighbours, lack of money, relationships with friends and family, and illness or deaths in the family.

To address the lack of research on coping strategies among female IDPs in LMICs, the aim of this paper is to explore the coping strategies used by women internally displaced within the Republic of Georgia due to the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. Below, we first situate our study within the concepts of coping and resilience, and the socio-political research setting.

Conceptual Approach

Coping is a contested concept, though numerous frameworks and assessment scales have been developed over the past four decades that attempt to distinguish its key components. Folkman and Lazarus (1980) defined coping as an attempt to master, tolerate, or reduce internal or external stressors that an individual perceives as exceeding existing resources. They suggested that coping types fell into two domains: problem-focused and emotion-focused (Folkman &

Lazarus, 1980, 1991). Coping assessment scales were based on this typology (see Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1985), and spawned a proliferation of other coping scales. Skinner et al. (2003) aimed to develop a coping taxonomy composed of “conceptually clear, mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories” (p.217). From their analysis of approximately 100 coping category systems proposed from the 1980s to 2000, five core domains emerged: problem solving, support seeking, avoidance, distraction, and positive cognitive restructuring. Table 1 below lists the definitions of these domains.

[insert Table 1 about here]

We use the Skinner et al. (2003) taxonomy to organize and interpret the coping strategies because the domains are well-supported in the literature on coping, covering a wide variety of thoughts and behaviours.

Coping and resilience

Research on coping strategies amongst IDPs and other conflict-affected populations is rooted within a broader scope of work focused on resiliency among humanitarian crisis-affected populations. Like the concept of coping, the concept of resilience is contested (Southwick et al., 2014), defined as a process of harnessing resources (including biological, psychosocial, structural, and cultural) to sustain wellbeing (Panter-Brick, 2014; Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013), a personal ability to successfully adapt to or recover from stress and trauma (Siriwardhana et al., 2014), and a stable trajectory of functioning after a clearly defined, highly adverse event (Bonanno, 2004, 2012).

This range of definitions present resilience as normatively positive; resilience is an entity that individuals are either blessed to possess or would do well to strive toward. This normative

aspect to resiliency marks a point of departure from coping, as coping includes reactions to adversity widely perceived as normatively ‘negative.’ Destructive emotions, avoidance of people and contexts, and distraction via illicit and/or illegal activities do not sit comfortably within most resilience concepts, with the possible exception of ‘perverse resilience’ (see Panter-Brick, 2014). Thus, coping encompasses a wider set of responses than resilience. However, coping is simultaneously narrower than resilience as some coping strategies may facilitate resilience to develop. For instance, Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010) found that a sentiment of hope amongst Afghan families imparted a sense of order to their lives, making them more resilient to traumas experienced. Thus, one can become resilient through ‘coping well.’ As we sought to explore both the normatively positive and negative responses to war and displacement, the concept of coping was deemed a better fit for our study objectives. Nonetheless, we recognise the interlinked and fluid nature of both resilience and coping, and the crucial importance of the cultural context in exploring responses to conflict (Panter-Brick, 2014).

Coping and loss in Georgia

Forcibly displaced persons such as IDPs and refugees suffer losses of tangible materials including property and personal belongings, along with intangible assets such as social support networks, socio-cultural practices, and identities connected to the social and physical spaces they have left behind (Davis, 1992). Our earlier work, focused on resource loss experienced by IDP women in Georgia, found that war-related trauma led to the loss of property, which caused the loss of livelihood and subsequent losses in the areas of social networks and mental and physical health (Seguin et al., 2016). As observed in other settings (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012; Panter-Brick et al., 2008),

ongoing, everyday stressors unrelated directly to war feature prominently in the stressors reported by internally-displaced Georgian women. Whilst respecting the impact of these losses, it is important to acknowledge that pain, suffering, conflict, poverty, and disorder is a routine part of many lives (Vigh, 2008). If crisis is chronic, conflict, violence, and poverty become embedded in the social fabric, leading to a ‘normalisation of crisis’ (Das, 2006).

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s ushered in a new ‘normal’ in many former constituent states. The vision of a steady progression toward a communist future was replaced with an era of instability in Georgia which became the norm (Frederiksen, 2008). Most Georgians enjoyed a modest but secure lifestyle during the Soviet era (Pelkmans, 2006), with many experiencing a drastic decline in their living standards in the post-Soviet era (Dudwick, 2003). Those in rural areas experienced a particularly drastic decline, suffering from poor infrastructure and a lack of economic opportunities (Mekhuzla & Roche, 2009), leading to a large proportion of the populace coping with economic hardship through subsistence farming, reducing expenditure, forgoing social and recreational activities, and selling assets, such as personal property, furniture, cars, and homes (Manning & Uplisashvili, 2007). Though many Georgians suffered due to the end of the Soviet era, displaced Georgians suffered further through displacement off their land which could have provided at least subsistence farming opportunities (Dudwick, 2003).

Research setting

The study took place in the Republic of Georgia which has experienced armed conflict at various points since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A war between Georgia and Russia in

August 2008 broke out over tensions between Georgia and the separatist region of South Ossetia, leading to the displacement of over 100,000 ethnic Georgians from South Ossetia into the rest of Georgia. Most IDPs live in purpose-built settlements next to established communities. While many of those displaced from edge of South Ossetia have returned to their homes, approximately 27,000 persons originally from deep within the disputed territory remain displaced (The Government of Georgia, 2015). Many Georgian IDPs face poverty, poor living conditions and infrastructure, and a lack of access to land, markets, employment opportunities, and financial services (The World Bank, 2013). High levels of mental disorders, functional disability, somatic distress, stress-factors, and limited access to mental health services have also been recorded among IDPs in Georgia (Chikovani et al., 2015; Makhashvili et al., 2014; Moreno et al., 2015). A quantitative study on coping amongst Georgian IDPs revealed an association between specific coping strategies and mental health outcomes, with mental disengagement, denial, venting emotions, substance abuse and gambling significantly associated with poor mental health outcomes, and use of humour, emotional support, active coping, acceptance and religion significantly associated with better mental health outcomes (Saxon et al., 2016).

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 Georgian women. The age range was 20 to 73 years, with an average age of 43. Interviewees were residing in one of three selected IDP settlements in Georgia near the border with South Ossetia: Shavshvebi (n=13), Skra (n=13), and Karaleti (n=16). Descriptions of these settlements are available elsewhere (Seguin et al., 2016).

This study was conducted in collaboration with the Global Initiative on Psychiatry–Tbilisi (GIP-T), an organisation which provides psychosocial support services to IDP populations in Georgia. Staff from GIP-T introduced the lead author to one ‘key woman’ from each settlement, who was purposively selected based on her status as an informal community leader. Key women were briefed on the study and then interviewed by one of two locally-recruited research assistants. After the interview, they were asked to suggest additional women to interview. As we sought to include a range of experiences and perspectives, the sampling was directed according to criteria regarding age, occupation, and marital status.

Fieldwork took place between December 2012 and February 2013. Georgian-language interviews took place in participants’ homes and were audio recorded. A professional transcriptionist and translator produced an English-language transcript from the Georgian audio recording. Translation errors were mitigated by back-checking English transcripts against Georgian audio recording of early interviews and prioritizing substantive over literal meaning. The interview topic guide focused on the strategies used by women to cope with the hardships and losses due to the war and displacement (see online Annex). On average interviews were 50 minutes in duration, ranging from 30 to 90 minutes.

English-language transcripts were entered into Nvivo software to assist in coding and analysis. Coding occurred concurrent to data gathering and followed an iterative process which enabled on-going reflection on the use and application of the coping taxonomy. Data on coping was categorised into the following categories: problem solving, support seeking, escape-avoidance, distraction, and cognitive restructuring. Excerpts of transcripts were frequently assigned to two or more domains if they signified more than one coping type. Our purpose in applying the

taxonomy developed by Skinner et al. (2003) was to provide a vantage point from which to interpret the data, and also to further theoretical development in the area of coping research.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Georgian National Council on Bioethics and by the Ethics Committee of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The research assistants provided information sheets and verbal explanations to participants, and answered queries and/or concerns regarding the research prior to each interview. All participants provided written informed consent and received a monetary reimbursement for their time equivalent to approximately 10 USD. Referral information for mental health and psychosocial support services was accessible for interviewees in case of distress (none became distressed during the interview). The names reported here are pseudonyms.

Results

Problem solving strategies were the most commonly reported strategies, reported by almost all women. This type was followed in frequency by support seeking, escape-avoidance, distraction, and cognitive restructuring. Most women used multiple strategies.

Problem solving

Problem solving coping strategies primarily included seeking employment, attending training sessions, and budgeting. Many women reported taking any and all jobs they could in order to cope with the financial losses. Growing and selling excess fruit and vegetables grown in allotments to provide much-needed income was a widely-reported activity. Many women also worked occasionally at temporary agricultural jobs involving heavy manual labour in fields and gardens. Marina noted:

In general, people living in our settlement are unemployed and the population of the [village of Skra next to Skra IDP settlement] hires them sometimes. They have cherry gardens and they call people from our settlement when they need to harvest them. Usually women do it. There are some seasonal jobs in the village sometimes and women from our settlement take them.

Besides agricultural jobs, some women were able to find employment at the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to which they had formerly turned for help.

Quite frequently women reported attending training sessions to help improve their job prospects. Lali noted: “I’ve [...] attended sewing training because I thought that it would give me the opportunity to get a job. I’ve attended every possible training.” Women reported a wide variety of budgeting techniques to cope with the loss of livelihoods. Virtually all women reported relying on home-grown food in order to avoid buying food, thus coping with financial woes. Natia reflected, “Thank God, we have these small land lots to grow our vegetables. So, we don’t have to buy them. It could have been worse.” Some women raised animals to avoid buying products such as eggs, meat, and dairy items. Nana reflected how “it helps me a bit. Otherwise, we would be in a very miserable situation.” Many women aspired to own animals such as cows and chickens, but not all could afford to buy or feed animals, or raise them in the limited space in the settlements.

Patriarchal gender relations presented a barrier for some women in seeking employment. For instance, Marta explains how her husband’s patriarchal attitude had constrained her job opportunities in the settlement: “My husband, for example, won’t let me wander the streets looking for a job. Even if there were jobs. He won’t let me work in night shifts. Neither as a cleaner.” However, the degree to which women’s employment opportunities were obstructed by men is unclear in the data. Marta felt that many other women were not similarly constrained:

Some women, on the other hand, won't even seek their husband's permission. They do what is best for their families. [...] It's not a problem for new generations. They live the way they want. My generation of women can't live otherwise, we still depend on our husbands.

Support seeking

Women reported turning to others for advice on specific problems and for instrumental help (such as money or goods). Others, such as Eteri, shared sorrow and 'heartache' with others in order to gain emotional support. Neighbours and family members were most-commonly cited as sources for support. Nutsa explained that the formation of relationships between neighbours in Shavshvebi had been key to helping the community cope with the displacement. She stated, "By taking care, supporting each other we have managed, and still manage to overcome these terrible times." The beneficial impact of close proximity to pre-displacement neighbours emerged as a salient theme. Irma explained how she drew strength from her previous neighbours who had settled in the same IDP settlement as her:

Some of them are my friends and relatives... I even share my last name with some of them. Well, my spouse's last name. [...] We help and support one another. It's one of the good things about living here. [...] We were friends in the village and we still are [...] Whenever we are out, we feel that we are surrounded by 'our' people. Every person is good, of course, we all are from the same gorge but seeing people from our village every day makes us stronger. We know that we are not alone and we support each other.

Living in close proximity to old neighbours imparted feelings of security and stability, through recognition that older age neighbours had survived the war and displacement, and that communities, though displaced, were largely intact. The quote above emphasizes the *emotional* support imparted through these established relationships. *Instrumental* support, in the form of money, assistance on tasks, and goods, was not commonly mentioned.

Many interviewees also sought support from 'new neighbours'; those neighbours whom they did not know prior to displacement. Such support took the form of emotional and instrumental support. Women shared many instances of helping and receiving help from neighbours. For

instance, residents in Shavshvebi settlement helped Irina cultivate her garden, build a chicken coop, and pay for her son's funeral. Women sometimes minded each other's children to allow mothers to concentrate on other tasks. Vardo describes how her neighbours cope by helping each other with laborious tasks:

In spring, we need tools. Others provided them for us. Well, they were a bit unfit but still. So, neighbours helped us with tools and moreover, they offered us their help. We used to help each other. No one has tilled the ground here in 20 years and one-pass tillage wasn't enough. The soil requires two-three years of work to get it into shape, so to speak. My spouse and I worked there alone and it was hard. Our neighbours offered us help. Later, we helped them.

Besides neighbours, family represented a resource to which women could turn for help. Natalia reports seeking and receiving support from her adult son and husband, both 'optimists' in her view:

I'm a pessimist. My spouse is an optimist. My son is an optimist too. I tell him he's my therapist because they help me overcome many things. Especially my son. He is very helpful. I often ask him for an advice; I always want to know his opinion about things. He's my son but talking with him calms me down. [...] Despite everything, I'm still pessimistic about things, and I often feel depressed. And whenever I feel depressed, my spouse and son help me feel better.

Beyond emotional support, women sought instrumental support from family members, especially extended family members who were not as negatively affected by the 2008 war. Izolda's parents, who had returned to their home near the buffer zone between South Ossetia and Georgia, assisted Izolda by giving her food and seeds. Children proved to be an extremely strong resource for respondents, by providing motivation for carrying on and adding meaning to life. For instance, Elisabed shared "After the war, I felt so bad, I felt empty. My only reason for being alive was my kids."

Though family and neighbours represented the largest sources from which women sought support, they also turned to friends beyond their settlements, co-workers, and to priests. Eliso was from the city of Gori originally, which meant that she had an already-existing network of

friends prior to settling in Karaleti settlement (located on the outskirts of Gori). She reflected on how this network helped her cope:

I have many friends in both Gori and this region because I was raised here and... Well, I think that they helped me cope with this everything. They help me, they understand what I feel, and they try to calm me down... Often, I don't even want to leave home but they keep inviting me and it helps me not to think about many things. [...] It's important to have friends who support you.

Perhaps because the sample included so few employed women (reflecting the high unemployment in the settlements), only a few stated that they sought support from co-workers.

Escape-avoidance

Escape-avoidance coping strategies followed support seeking and problem solving strategies in terms of frequency reported by the women. The most commonly-reported types of escape-avoidance were resignation, physical and emotional isolation, physical escape, crying, and wishful thinking. Several women reported coping via an attitude of resignation; conceding that hardship could not be overcome. For instance, Lali spoke about how she coped with the loss of her livelihood, which prior to the war had consisted of growing and selling apples. Now, realizing that this way of life was over, she simply 'followed the flow of life:'

There, we had boxes full of apples and we used to sell them. Russians and others were buying them. It was our source of income that was helping us move forward and be happy in this life. Now I have given up on everything and I follow the flow of life.

Some women coped by isolating themselves, physically and/or emotionally. For instance, Elisabeth rarely ventured outside. She stated that after arriving in Karaleti, "I stopped going out and became more introverted. [...] I feel better when I'm alone. I don't feel comfortable when I'm out." Besides physical isolation, some women coped with their problems via emotional isolation. This consisted of concealing emotions and consciously not reaching out to others for help, as demonstrated by Jana's statement: "I do not leave home. [...] I don't go out, and let

other people know about my emotions, or let other people see my gloomy face.” Some women were motivated to conceal their anger, vulnerabilities, and needs in order to not ‘bother’ others with their problems.

Crying was occasionally listed as a coping strategy by the women. For instance, Izolda explained that crying helped her cope with negative feelings: “My nerves are so bad, whenever my nerves tense me up I feel very bad if I don’t cry. [...] Whenever I stay alone I cry a lot. It helps me feel relieved.” Some women engaged in wishful thinking during the interview, which commonly consisted of comments about hoping to return to their villages of origin. Medea stated,

I live in hope. I’m still hopeful. Some people say that they are not but I hope to return home. I still believe, I don’t know why. I believe we will return home. I don’t know. [...] I have a feeling we are going to leave soon.

Lataври explained that she thinks about the possibility of return to her origin village in order to ‘not give into sorrow.’ She ponders, “What if they let us return? We all dream about going back home.”

Distraction

The women reported a wide variety of distraction techniques in order to cope with their circumstances, including seeking employment and working, gardening, doing housework, reading and watching TV, and visiting others. Seeking employment, working, and gardening overlapped with the problem solving coping domain discussed above, and visiting others overlapped with seeking support.

Besides the obvious economic benefit of working, some women described how working helped them divert their attention from problems and combat feelings of depression. Though unemployed at the time of the interview, Vardo had previously worked as a ‘village chief’ in Skra. She remarked that the position helped her not only financially but by providing a welcome distraction:

[S]taying in and doing the same all the time can make you feel depressed. When you have a job, you meet new people, people from NGOs, many of them visited us... There were training courses, retraining groups... I had to pay attention to students. And it all was different, active engagement helps you divert your attention to these things and forget about your everyday problems in your family for some time. I almost never felt depressed. [...] I was less irritated by things, so to speak.

Sofiko had found employment with an NGO focused on women’s rights. She reflected on how her job has impacted her well-being: “Things are relatively better now. I have a job and I’m very happy. Being out of work and waking up to nothing was terrible.”

Besides the value imparted by training sessions in the form of potential projects and employment opportunities (as discussed above), women appreciated the diversion of such sessions. Besides learning something new, Izolda found that attending training sessions reduced her stress level. She shared, “Whenever I attended training, my soul was relaxing while listening to those discussions.”

In addition to the financial benefit to growing fruits and vegetables discussed in the problem solving section above, several women, such as Marta, felt that the activity also provided an opportunity to divert attention away from other problems. She shared, “I can’t wait to plant onions and garlic, hoe the land, and watch seeds grow. I’m so excited. Going out and doing something would add meaning to my life. Physical work is our vital force.”

Quite a few women reported that they tried to find tasks to do around the house as a distraction technique. Eka explained, “Being idle is very difficult, [a] lot of thoughts come to your head when you have nothing to do, you start to remember everything [...] When you clean your house, you switch your attention.” Jana stated that she distracted herself from stress with a combination of reading and housework: “I entertain myself, distract myself by doing housework. I also love reading and this is how I handle it. I may put off doing some housework and start reading.” When asked how she coped with her problems, Eka reported that she liked to visit neighbours; “going here and there.” Vardo stated that people in the settlement gathered and talked to each other in order to entertain themselves, especially in the summer when the weather was good.

Cognitive restructuring

Interviewees spoke of invoking religious beliefs, focusing on mental strength, and downplaying losses and focusing on positive aspects of life as instances of cognitive restructuring. Some respondents reported their faith allowed them to reconceptualise their circumstances in a positive way, and that church attendance and faith in God had a calming effect, reducing stress. Tamar noted how “many IDPs go to the church and it helps us a lot. When I come out from there I feel so spiritually calm... It’s very good.” Nana concurred, stating “Going to church and seeing a priest makes me feel peaceful and disburdened. When I return home, I feel like I was on a holiday, I’m so relaxed.”

Women also reported that faith helped them make sense of and interpret past events, by viewing such events as ‘God’s plan.’ For instance, Natia drew meaning from religion and this ‘helped her live.’ She stated, “Faith in God gives the biggest, strongest meaning to my life.” The fact

that they had survived the war was viewed as strong evidence of God's protection, and as an omen that God would continue to protect them. Marta attributed the relatively few civilian deaths to intercession by God and the Virgin Mary because the road which formed the escape route from the war was covered in fog in the day that many fled.

Quite a few women drew confidence from the fact they had been able to meet the demanding challenges that life had presented to them so far. Natia explained how her inner strength, which developed through the challenges related to the war and displacement, helped her overcome the wounds of the past:

Personally, I feel that I have more strength now. [...] I feel inner strength. You need strength to overcome what we've been through. It came to me naturally and helped me overcome and forget everything that happened four years ago. [...] The fact that you are able to analyse, overcome and keep quiet about all these things is what makes you strong [...] Probably, the only positive thing that happened to us is that we feel this inner strength. We are more self-confident after all that we've been through.

This comment also demonstrated the overlap between different coping styles; there are elements to emotional isolation ('keeping quiet,' not seeking support) in this statement. Guranda as well thought she had become a stronger person since being tested by the hardships of displacement. She shared,

After the war because I managed to overcome all difficulties. I didn't become withdrawn, aggressive, or evil. On the contrary, I looked at all this from a totally different perspective and I realized that I am strong. If you don't face difficulties, you will never understand how much you are able to do. All the bad things that happen in our lives are a test. I've already been in this situation many times. Through the difficulties and it made me realize that I am strong.

Maia felt her sense of strength increased after becoming displaced as a necessary adaptation to having to protect her family. Similarly, Lali reflected how "I still think that I will achieve something. I'm not going to give up because I want a better future for my kids. I really want it."

Coping through downplaying one's losses was frequently implied by the respondents. Positioning others' troubles as truly insurmountable diminished the scale of their own problems. For instance, Medea downplayed problems faced by her family by discussing the needs of elderly people. She queried, "What about elderly people who can't work? Nobody's helping them. What should they do? They can't even pay their bills with their pension. [...] I feel pity for these people."

Women also considered that circumstances could have been even worse for them. Many stated the most important thing to consider was that they were alive. Irma's statement was typical: "The most important thing is that everyone is alive and healthy" Frequently, women compared their fate to the fate of others who had lost family members, thereby minimizing their own losses. For instance, Natia stated,

[P]eople who lost their children... How can you talk about the things you left there and riches after that? Personally, I have this feeling and sometimes I feel ashamed to say that I left this, that there or that I miss someone or something. What should people who lost their children do? How are they going to live their lives? It makes me feel ashamed to talk about my things.

Discussion

The aim of this paper is to better understand the coping strategies used by IDP women in Georgia in response to the resource losses suffered as a result of the war and displacement (Seguin et al., 2016). We were prompted by gaps in the evidence on coping approaches among conflict-affected persons in LMICs (Seguin & Roberts, 2015), and gender-specific explorations of coping approaches.

Coping strategies were interpreted via a coping typology put forth by Skinner et al. (2003). Part of our rationale for choosing this conceptual approach was the proposed clarity and mutual exclusivity of the coping domains. Despite these anticipated benefits, some of the coping strategies used by our respondents overlap as represented in Figure 1. A specific coping activity or mind-set can serve one or more purposes. For instance, gardening represented both a problem-solving and a distraction activity for the respondents. Distraction techniques reported by the women in this study included visiting others (which overlaps with support-seeking strategies), and seeking employment and working, and gardening (both which overlap the problem solving domain). We chose to detail these overlaps to demonstrate the complex nature of coping. The classification of coping strategies is nuanced and researchers should adopt a critical approach as this field develops.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

As noted by Panter-Brick et al. (2009), the challenges faced by conflict-affected persons are wider than war-related trauma. They may encounter forms of suffering and adversity extending into the years following conflict (Seguin et al., 2016). The coping strategies chosen by conflict-affected persons reflect their day-to-day challenges, which revolve not around the mental health impacts of war trauma, but the material deprivation resulting from the war and displacement. Much of the semi-structured interviews focused on how women addressed their difficult socioeconomic circumstances related to being displaced, rather than on mental health problems attributable to the conflict.

The strategies outlined in the results section reflect the importance of the cultural context for coping; the women in this study most frequently reported striving to re-establish the economic opportunities in which they engaged prior to displacement as their main way of coping with the difficult material circumstances in the IDP settlements. This is shown in their careful planting, tending, and harvesting of produce, careful budgeting, and selling excess foodstuffs in local markets. These coping strategies represent an attempt to return to ‘normality,’ entailing subsistence farming and small-scale market activity which had become the norm in rural Georgia in the early 1990s (Manning & Uplisashvili, 2007). Engaging in such activities generally yielded a sense of hope and relief amongst respondents. Coping through repairing a ‘broken economy’(Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010) has been observed elsewhere in other studies on war-affected adults residing in LMICs (Bennet et al., 1995; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Hardgrove, 2009).

Seeking social support was a common coping strategy, reflecting the embeddedness of kinship networks and collective well-being within Georgian culture (Makhashvili et al., 2010) and more widely across the former Soviet Union (Oushakine, 2006). Among the Georgian IDPs in this study, relationships with cherished family members were sometimes held as the only worthwhile thing left in life, consistent with importance Georgians typically place on children (Makhashvili et al., 2010).

Similar to Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010), we observed that culture is a double-edged sword vis-à-vis coping. Whilst relying on kinship ties is sanctioned by Georgian cultural mores, the respondents were well aware of the cultural expectation of the reciprocal giving of goods or services, and social consequences if the requirement was unfulfilled. Perhaps the inability

to provide *material* support to others led women to seek and receive *moral* support rather than *material* support. The widespread material deprivation in rural areas of Georgia (in which the settlements included in this study were situated) also presented a barrier to women requesting material support from others; many stated that their neighbours (both in and outside the IDP settlements) were struggling financially as well. Moral support sought and received by displaced Georgian women was found to be broadly protective for mental health amongst Georgian IDPs in a quantitative study (Saxon et al., 2016) and other war-affected populations in LMICs (Seguin & Roberts, 2015).

Only a small minority of women mentioned accessing counsellors, psychologists, or psychiatrists to deal with their problems, reflecting the limited access to mental health services among IDPs in Georgia (Chikovani et al., 2015). Georgian cultural mores which favour the concealment of traumatic events rather than disclosure (Makhashvili et al., 2010), as well as a tendency of some war-affected persons in LMICs to appeal to friends, family, neighbours, and community members rather than to specialized services (Ruwanpura et al., 2006) likely also impact this trend.

Coping through engagement with faith and religion was commonly reported by the respondents, attesting to the importance and prominence of the Georgian Orthodox church in Georgia since the fall of the Soviet Union. The perceived positive impacts of faith-based coping were two-fold; enabling women to assign meaning to hardships, and to interact with others and potentially receive support from others during religious services. Viewing the war and displacement as ‘God’s plan’ assigned an inevitability to the events and aftermath which conferred comfort. The meaning-making function of faith-based coping has been reported

elsewhere amongst other war-affected groups (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Hardgrove, 2009)

As seeking employment and support seeking emerged as the most-commonly-used coping strategies, future interventions to foster employment opportunities and maintain and strengthen social bonds may be effective in supporting internally-displaced Georgian women to function. Due to the importance of kinship ties and collective well-being, complementary interventions which integrate individually-focused trauma treatment and community-based psychosocial assistance are needed to improve mental health and well-being in the Georgian cultural context. These approaches acknowledge the need to foster ‘structural resilience,’ building robust structures which allow individuals to succeed in employment, education, and relationship domains and thereby facilitating trajectories of resilience (Ager et al., 2013; Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012). As the coping strategies presented here differ from the strategies of conflict-affected Georgians who have returned to their home areas in South Ossetia (Saxon et al., 2016), disparities in mental health outcomes and coping amongst conflict-affected groups (including IDPs, refugees, returnees, and entrapped populations) require greater research focus.

Limitations

The results presented in this paper are based on one-time interviews which may have reduced the depth of discussion compared to repeat interviews. The high degree of saturation in the findings may indicate that key points were well-covered. Interviews occurred during the day rather than evenings and so we may have excluded employed women. However, the high proportion of unemployed women in the study reflects the widespread unemployment in Georgian IDP settlements. Our rather limited sample size precludes meaningful comparisons of coping strategies by demographic characteristics. Intended meanings may have been lost in

translation from Georgian to English but we followed best practice procedures including double translating and transcribing a sample of pilot interviews, and having Georgian-speaking research associates independently check for errors between the recording and transcripts. Though the coping findings presented here are highly context-specific, our observations on the application of the typology may have broader relevancy since the typology used was derived from research in other settings. Finally, the exclusive focus on women in the sample precludes generalisation of these coping strategies to internally displaced Georgian men.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to increase the evidence base on coping strategies used by female IDPs by exploring the coping approaches of IDP women in Georgia. A range of coping strategies were reported to offset the losses reported in Seguin et al. (2016), which were interpreted by a coping typology suggested by Skinner et al. (2003). Problem solving (in the form of seeking employment and using financial resources carefully) and support seeking behaviours emerged as the most-commonly-used strategies.

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